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Pristine beauty

CONSERVATIONISTS' GEM BOGS DOWN IN CONGRESS

By Paul Rogers
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When a conservation group spent \$29 million to purchase a breathtakingly beautiful stretch of the San Mateo County coast from developers two years ago, the idea was that by now the land would be the newest addition to America's national park system.

The vision was straight from central casting. Trails for hikers, bikes and horses. Panoramic views of the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay. Signposts. Kiosks with maps. Rangers wearing green flat-brimmed hats.

But today, because of an unexpected logjam in Congress, the dream is still just that. The 4,262-acre Rancho Corral de Tierra, a bucolic expanse of chaparral, row crops, and rolling hills looming above the Highway 1 towns of Moss Beach and Montara, remains as it has for the past 165 years -- largely off-limits to the public, a hidden landscape locked behind gates.

The ranch could be the largest addition to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area since the 78,000-acre park was established in 1972. It would link Crystal Springs Reservoir, McNee Ranch State Park near Devils Slide and other protected lands. It also would join Alcatraz, Muir Woods, the Presidio, Marin Headlands and other world-famous properties as a new piece of the ``GGNRA," as outdoor-lovers call it.

But a bill that would expand the boundaries of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area southward to include the ranch has been stalled in Congress for the past two years over minor disagreements and a run of bad luck.

Until it is included in the national parks system, the ranch cannot be opened to the public. Nor can it be eligible for \$15 million in federal parks funding to help pay half the purchase price. So it sits. And financial concerns mount.

``I'm frustrated," said Audrey Rust, president of the Peninsula Open Space Trust, a non-profit land trust based in Menlo Park that purchased the ranch in May of 2001. ``This is a good project. It's a bargain for the federal government. It's here. It is ready to go. It's not a wish or a pipe dream."

Once part of an 1839 Mexican land grant to Francisco Guerrero, an early mayor of San Francisco, the ranch has had many owners over the years, including Westinghouse and other developers in the 1960s and 1970s who hoped to build thousands of homes, along with shopping centers and golf courses.

Put up for sale in 2000, the land was purchased by the Peninsula Open Space Trust from Robert Naify, 81, a San Francisco billionaire who once controlled United Artists theaters, Emil Magliocco Jr., an Atherton developer, and other partners.

Right after the sale, Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, introduced a bill in Congress to expand the recreation area's boundaries to include the ranch. A similar version by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., passed the Senate.

But last year the Lantos effort became bogged down when a key committee chairman, Rep. George Radanovich, R-Fresno, attached amendments to it to provide money to schools in his district surrounding Yosemite National Park. The session expired and the bill died.

Feinstein reintroduced the Senate version this year, and it passed in April. But Lantos' House version remains bottled up in Radanovich's committee.

Dispute over farmland

This time the dispute is over 232 acres of farmland on the ranch. The deep brown soil, tilled by the Lea family under the name Cabrillo Farms for two generations, grows pumpkins, fava beans, Brussels sprouts and other vegetables.

The farmers had rented it from the previous ranch owners. Now, Rust says she wants to sell the 232 acres to the Lea family with a conservation easement to prohibit development so they can continue farming and operating their ``Farmer's Daughter'' fruit stand across from the tiny Half Moon Bay Airport.

But the San Mateo County Farm Bureau came out against the bill this year. Its officials said that they didn't want the 232 acres of farmland included in the national park boundaries. The larger California Farm Bureau agreed.

``Once farming or ranching falls under the management of the Department of Interior, it always comes under fire,'' said Bruce Blodgett, director of natural resources for the California Farm Bureau Federation in Sacramento. ``It's just a matter of time before people try to eliminate farming.''

Examples abound

Blodgett cited cattle grazing on Mojave National Park, dairy ranching on Point Reyes National Seashore, and alfalfa farming in the Klamath Wildlife National Refuge on the California-Oregon border. In each instance, Congress allowed agriculture when lands were set aside as protected areas years ago.

But over time, endangered species concerns, tougher rules, and opposition by environmental groups have made life miserable for the farm interests, he said.

Radanovich, chairman of the House subcommittee on national parks, says the bill will not move until the issue is resolved.

``He wants to see the concerns of the farm bureau addressed,'' said Geoff Embler, a spokesman for Radanovich, in Washington, D.C. ``He's reluctant to proceed until the two sides come to an agreement.''

Time is running. Rust's group, which put up the \$29.75 million to buy the ranch, and secured \$14.75 million in state parks bond funding, is paying the remaining carrying costs. It can't use its own money tied up in the project to preserve other open space. Meanwhile, the public zooms by on Highway 1, admiring the land from afar.

Rust says the farmland should stay in the future national park boundary. That way, if the farmer ever wants to sell it, it will go to the national parks, and not be developed, she said.

But Rust, one of the nation's leading land preservation experts, also said that she may be willing to work out a compromise. Meanwhile Blodgett, of the farm bureau, said that if the 232 cultivated acres -- about 5 percent of the total ranch -- are not included in the park boundaries, his group will support the bill.

The National Park Service says that if a deal is reached, it will allow public access within a few months.

The land is home to peregrine falcons, deer, coho salmon and unique plant species such as Montara bush lupine. And on a clear day, a person atop 2,000-foot Montara Mountain can see Mount Diablo to the east and the Farallon Islands, 27 miles west offshore.

``We thought it had such incredible support that it should have flown through Congress," said Rich Weideman, a spokesman for the National Park Service. ``But we are optimistically hopeful."

Site called 'worthy'

Edgar Wayburn, 97, who worked with former San Francisco Rep. Phil Burton to establish the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in 1972, blocking development then across the Presidio and Marin Headlands, said the property is of national significance.

``The country around Half Moon Bay is superb," said Wayburn, honorary national president of the Sierra Club. ``It is beautiful, and still wild when you get out away from the relatively small towns. It is worthy of national park status."

Rust simply wants the deal completed so her group, which has preserved 52,000 acres of Bay Area beaches, forests, wetlands and open space since 1977, can move on to the next project.

``This is important to the people of California, and the rest of the nation," she said, hiking along a mossy ridge top on the ranch this week. ``It is a critical piece of land, and it needs to move ahead."

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